

Sweatin' Bullets Part I

by F.W. "Foureyes" Schindler

Casting Your Own for Fun and Profit

One of my most memorable deer hunts took place a few years back, after a nighttime blizzard had dumped about a foot of heavy wet snow on the ground. Early the next morning I located a fresh set of tracks and followed them through the knee-deep snow for about an hour. Uphill and downhill I went, slipping and sliding and trying to be quiet whilst keeping a sharp lookout ahead for the deer. Then suddenly there he was, a buck with a decent rack watching me from behind a screen of snow-covered willow branches maybe twenty feet away. Slowly, very slowly, I eased my .50 caliber Hawken style percussion rifle to my shoulder, cocked the hammer silently by holding the front trigger back, and when the sights looked good: KA-BLAMMM! The rifle roared with a sound like thunder in the closeness of the snow-draped woods and my big, 370 grain home-cast pure lead maxi-ball, pushed by 90 grains of Pyrodex ffg equivalent powder, dropped him on the spot. He wasn't the biggest buck in the woods but he was a good one with tall, well-developed six point antlers that would have made him a nice eight pointer if he'd only grown brow tines. Anyway, it was the climax of an exciting hunt that justified much picture taking and a trip to the taxidermist afterward. And what made the hunt even more memorable was that I had done the deed with one of my own cast bullets. Frosting on the cake!

Why Cast Lead Bullets?

Lots of reasons. Sure, pure lead bullets that are swaged to perfection can usually be purchased over the counter or by mail order in almost any caliber a shooter could want. However there is much satisfaction in taking game with a bullet of one's own manufacture (as I've related above), or even just shooting a good group of holes in a paper target with home-cast slugs. It's simply part of the charm of shooting the old-tech muzzleloaders, not to mention the practical economics of casting one's own bullets if you shoot a lot. And you can also sell 'em, too! I've been doing it all for over thirty years.

Both the knowledge and the equipment necessary for casting bullets are inexpensive and easy to come by from sources such as the Lee Precision, Inc. catalog and website, and the Lyman Products Corp. catalog and their website. The Dixie Gun Works catalog is another good resource. And then there are some other interesting and informative websites. Two that I like to refer to are www.civilwarguns.com and [gejohn.org/black powder revolvers.html](http://gejohn.org/blackpowderrevolvers.html), both of which provide the insight and information of some very knowledgeable shooters. There are other websites and good literature available, too, which I've listed at the end of this story, not the least of which is the interesting and entertaining older book *Sixguns* by legend-



Using a 2 cavity mold such as shown here, the author can set up and cast a hundred bullets in less time than it takes to go out and buy them – if the retailer even has them to sell! And, the cost is usually zero. Gloves are optional – eye protection is a must.

ary cowboy gun writer Elmer Keith (the book is still available at libraries and from second hand sources). Besides being a good read from cover to cover, *Sixguns* also contains an informative though somewhat dated chapter on bullet casting as it was done in earlier times.

There is a modest investment that must be made in order to get started in bullet casting. Of course any cast iron pot hung



A lineup of bullet molds presently owned by the author, some of which have been used for 30 years or more. Shown are molds for: .54 caliber round ball, .56 caliber round ball, .50 caliber round ball, .50 caliber maxi ball, plus .36 and .44 caliber round ball and conical bullet molds for percussion revolvers, along with two molds for .41 Remington Magnum bullets. The author currently owns 17 guns he casts bullets for, 11 of which are muzzleloaders.



There are bullets galore when you cast your own. Shown here are two of the author's favorite summertime shootin' irons – a replica Remington New Model Army in .44 caliber made by Pietta and a replica Colt 1860 Army also in .44 caliber, this one by Uberti.

over a campfire will do for melting lead, and reenactors portraying 18th and 19th century soldiers and outdoorsmen sometimes do it as “show and tell” during their encampments, but we’re talking here about serious bullet production. To start with you need a good production pot, also called an electric furnace, for melting the lead under controlled temperature, plus a few inexpensive basic tools: a lead ladle and a lead dipper, and maybe an ingot mold in which to store some refined lead in handy one pound ingots that you have removed the impurities from after fluxing. About a hundred dollars gets you going.

The premier bullet mold maker Lyman Products Corp. markets what they call “The Lyman Big Dipper” bullet casting starter kit that includes a ten pound electric furnace, a dipper tool for pouring the molten metal into the mold, a four cavity ingot mold for storing excess clean lead plus a good instruction booklet. Then all that’s needed is to buy a bullet mold, scrounge up some lead and voila, you’re in the bullet-making business. If you are the enterprising kind and have friends

who shoot a lot but don’t cast their own bullets, or if you attend shoots where there are likely to be potential customers for the more common calibers that are being shot, you can sell your product. Also gun shops sometimes buy cast bullets, to give their customers an alternative to expensive swaged bullets from the big suppliers.

It should be remembered that muzzleloading guns are best fed bullets made of pure lead so the projectile can be easily pressed home and will be supple enough when the gun is fired that the conical bullet or patched ball will grip the barrel lands and grooves tightly at the pressures generated by black powder – which is a concern when shooting skirted minie ball bullets. Pure, soft lead is much preferred for shooting patched round balls so the patch will grip both the barrel lands and the ball better. Thus, the shooting of black powder muzzleloaders simplifies the bullet hardness question that only comes into play with smokeless powder cartridge guns which produce much higher velocities that tend to strip the lead off of pure lead bullets. Although shooters of muzzleloaders like to use pure lead in our cast bullets when we can, wheel weights or any other lightly alloyed lead is permissible for most applica-



With the Dixie Gun Works catalog and the Lyman Cast bullet handbook shown here, and other literature available, there's sufficient info to get started in bullet casting.

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tions when a shooter isn't trying to wring out gilt-edged accuracy as in competition target shooting. I like the advice published in the Dixie Gun Works catalog concerning bullet metal, and all of us bullet casters should probably frame it and hang it on a wall somewhere. It reads "If the only thing you have is hard lead or you do not know what you have, use it anyway." That shines!¹

And where do we find our lead? Happily, lead can usually be found at no cost – if we keep our eyes peeled for it. After having been associated with the plumbing and heating, construction and destruction trades for most of my life, I've managed to amass quite a bit of lead, probably enough to keep me in bullet metal well into my golden years! For example, sources that I've obtained pure lead from include old water and sewer piping, always free for the taking, as well as pure lead flashing from the roofing trade. There are other sources, such as boat yards (old lead sailboat ballast) and the scrap metal junk yards. And of course wheel weights from auto repair shops are a valuable source of bullet lead (although the lead from car batteries, which contain highly corrosive acid, are not). It might require a bit

of work to salvage the lead sometimes, but scrap lead can generally be found and is free for the taking.

Also, I've managed to recycle a lot of my cast bullets by digging them out of the sand in the backstop at our local gun club pistol range. There are steel bullet traps for sale out there, too. I've never used one, but it seems like a good way to reclaim spent lead bullets if small calibers and light loads are used, and small calibers and light loads are the most fun to shoot a lot anyway.

Of course, lead can be purchased at plumbing supply outlets, too. However, in over thirty years of casting bullets I

have never once sullied my reputation as a skinflint by buying lead!

Footnote:

¹Dixie Gun Works Catalog #163, "White Lead," P. 605. **MB**

*... to be continued.
Check back next month
for Part II.*



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